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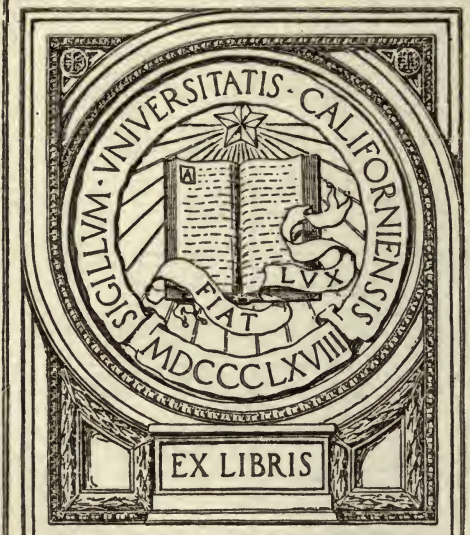

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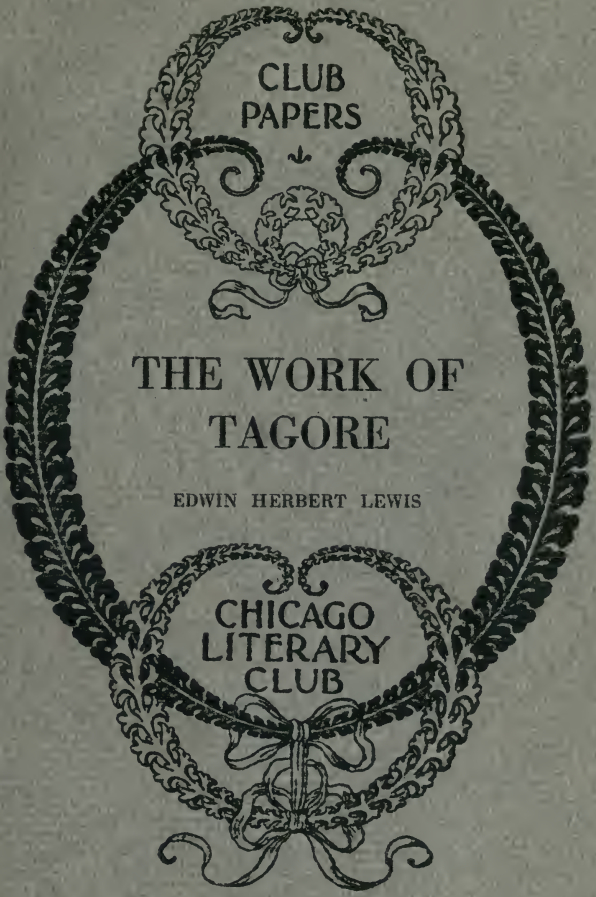

THE WORK OF TAGORE

EDWIN HERBERT LEWIS

CHICAGO
LITERARY
CLUB

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BY

EDWIN HERBERT LEWIS

CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

1917

THE WORK OF TAGORE

HE only time before this when I ventured to say anything in this presence was more than four years ago, when I spoke of Will Moody's treatment of the Promethean theme. Shortly afterward Sir Rabindranath and his son Ratindranath were our guests here. They dined with some of us, and afterwards listened with pleasure to Mr. Legler's paper on Whitman. Two years later their friend, Dr. J. C. Bose, eminent in electricity and in physiology, was here, and listened appreciatively to Dr. Johnson's paper on the physiological problem of life. All these names — Whitman, Moody, Tagore, and Bose — seem to bear on the central problem of democracy. We all feel that problem. I will try to state it in familiar but not political words. Is it the chief end of man to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever, or is it his chief end to subdue the earth and all that in it is?

Moody approached the problem from the Greek end. Prometheus is man wresting fire from heaven. He is man subduing not only the earth, but God. By mastering the lightning instead of praying to it, he lengthens his arm till it strikes a harder blow than the thunderbolt. Then he ceases—or seems to cease—to need Zeus. He is independent of Zeus, and the priests of Zeus, and the king who gets his divine right from Zeus, and the armies that get their right from king and priest. So western democracy began, and so it continued. It proceeded till the French Revolution cried, "Hang the last king with the entrails of the last priest." Again and again you see king, priest, and army lined up to resist the prophet armed with threats and the workman armed with a machine. And when a canny workman saves up money enough to buy an army of machines, so that he becomes a sort of king himself, he has to meet the attacks of those who were his fellow workmen. In some such guise does democracy appear from the Greek angle.

That it should so appear is due to causes far recessive, of which only one need here be mentioned. Had tools been allowed to evolve continuously, as labor-saving devices and emancipators of the spirit, no such duel of technology and ideals need have appeared. But cattle intervened and interrupted. These movable, capturable, unearned increments lured the

conqueror down from the mountains. Cattle are capital, and herds are pecuniary considerations. From Kassite Babylonia to Austrian Bosnia money has complicated industry and precipitated war. A coin, *cuneus*, is a wedge, and splits. A coin is itself a machine, and not merely a wedge, but a sort of storage battery for the lightning. And the peaceful fennel stalk of Prometheus easily becomes a gun.

But Tagore tells us that the civilization of Greece was nurtured within city walls. "The West," he says, "seems to take a pride in thinking it is subduing nature, as if we were living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things. This sentiment is the product of the city-wall habit and training of mind." [1] He tells us that when European settlers invaded America there ensued a struggle with primeval forests, but that the forests, the great living cathedrals of nature, conveyed to the conqueror no deep significance. 'They brought him wealth and power, and perhaps at times ministered to his enjoyment of beauty or inspired a solitary poet, but they never acquired a sacred association in the hearts of men as the place of a great spiritual reconcilement, where man's soul had its meeting place with the soul of the world.' [2] He does not suggest that things should have been otherwise, for America doubtless has a valu-

[1] *Sadhana*, p. 5. [2] *Sadhana*, p. 12.

able experience to relate, but he says that the early conquerors of India were assimilated to the forest. Not conquest and possession of nature, but enjoyment of her, union with her, is India's contribution.

The forest did indeed inspire our solitary poets, and none more than Whitman. But Whitman loved the locomotive, too. In a somewhat sprawling fashion he attempted the straddle—to love God's world and also the conquest of it. He cheered lustily when any democrat succeeded in subduing a bit of the forest, but in his day there was enough of it left for him to loaf in and invite his soul.

What the far future of the earth's surface will be, no man can say. Intrinsically it would seem that a ball of rock eight thousand miles thick could not be entirely conquered and put to any known physiological use of any breed of organisms produced by the weathering of its surface. We happened along when the distribution of heat and carbon dioxide reached a certain delicate balance, we, the walking bits of a thin film called life. No one of us is ever likely to own the whole thing, much less tear down the sunset and exhibit it at ten cents a head. But it does look as if in time every acre of the surface would carry a sign of no trespass, and every discoverable vein of oil, coal, iron, copper, lead, tin, zinc, gold, silver, and platinum would be gnawed out and used to increase the general

tension of social relations. The acres of our plains will be cultivated inch by inch with instruments made of metals, and yet the cities will be larger than ever. Under such conditions, how much chance is there likely to be for communion with a hypothetical personality whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean, and the living air, and in the mind of man?

The progress of the machine industry has made all our western thinking technological. To subdue the refractory earth we have learned that exact micrometric methods are essential. Chemistry, physics, biology are all mere phases of that intimate struggle of man with his own mother. In the course of the process he learns to recognize frankly enough his continuity with her. To the eye of the chemist this room contains only atoms, to the eye of the physicist only electrons, to the eye of the biologist only cells. The constellation of these units into some forty men can hardly conceal from the scientist the deeper reality— or at least *his* deeper reality— of which the bodies are for him mere appearances. But our scientific recognition of the continuity does not arouse in us any new mysticism. The atom does not yearn for the universe, the electron sends no look of passionate desire to the stars, and the cell does not adore the world-wide bubble to which it belongs.

I take it that the western method has, how-

ever, some value, even in its defect. Imagine a highly intelligent man so deeply imbued with scientific method that he made it his metaphysic. He would sincerely regard his own body and mind as a mechanism, and an ethics would illogically but inevitably follow; he would try to live up to his conviction. He would be keenly aware of his continuity with nature, and would have no desire to conquer her in his own interest. He would become impersonal and impartial to so high a degree that his atheism would almost coincide with the theism of Christ. Freed from egotism he would render to all a service as perfect as that of sunlight. All this if the organism were highly intelligent in every sense of the word. But in a less happy instance the result might be the opposite. If his sense of continuity freed him from social conscience, if he were persuaded that because men are chemical machines they have no rights, if a natural instinct of conquest seemed to him the inevitable voice of nature, then he would be a deadly and undemocratic creature.

Neither unqualified type can exist in fact, for no person can become utterly impersonal, nor can any man escape the ideals which are the sole meaning of our physiological processes. But you see in every man to-day the struggle between mechanism and ideals. To one statesman (or general, or engineer, or physician, or clergyman, or educator) machin-

ery is a servant, to another it is a master. In one it increases benevolence, in another tyranny. We see excess of statistics, we see blindness to statistics. We see excess of organization, and lack of organization. We believe that religion should be democratic, but it is hard to get the democrats to church. And so it goes. We westerners are all on the straddle. We cannot give up Zeus, and we won't go back on Prometheus. Naturally our comments on the present mixup in Europe are unimportant. We know in a dim way that it is a struggle of democracy with status, but as we neither believe deeply in the brotherhood of man nor have tried deeply to understand our own problems, we are up a stump.

Now in contrast to all this way of thinking we have Tagore's way. I fancy that many of us have regarded Hindu thought as peculiarly monistic when it was n't peculiarly polytheistic. There have been in India, as there have been in the West, men who felt that the visible world was at once unreal, illusory, and contemptible, but that every one of its appearances is merged in a reality that is invisible, indivisible, and admirable. This statement does not define every sort of absolutistic monism, but Shankara, Plato, Lucretius, Hegel, Bradley, Royce, and Mrs. Eddy — the list is really not intended as satire — have treated the visible world as less real than the imagined. Back of the vision called the landscape

lay something indescribable and ineffable, or grained with atoms, or warmed with love, or simply a gray and neutral wholeness in which all distinctions vanished. But Tagore does not belong with those people. He is a great Brahmo, the son of a great Brahmo, the grandson of a great Brahmo. His family revolted alike from monism and from polytheism.

They conceived God in the older Hindu way, as present in all nature and yet as personal. That is the hardest of theologies to manage, and the balance is equally hard in science. Dr. Bose keeps it, for he applies exact electrical methods of investigation to plants, finds their functions parallel with those of animals, and is filled with joy that he and the flowers are alike children of God. It is no accident that Bose turned from his independent invention of wireless telegraphy to the study of plants, for India's strength has lain in her sympathetic care of plants and animals. And in theology and art Tagore keeps the same balance curiously well. Formal logic never prevents him from the exercise of free symbolism. It is not logical to call the earth a footstool and then instantly regard it as a depth, but you forget it when Tagore says to God:

> Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.
>
> When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.[1]

[1] *Gitanjali,* poem 10.

Western pantheism and pancosmism and immanentism are rarely personal. To Spinoza all things are modes of God, and therefore man is immortal, and action should proceed from intellectual love of eternal laws. But Spinoza does not pray. Wordsworth recognizes the presence whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, but you do not catch him exchanging confidences with it. Tennyson cries,

> Speak to him, for he hears, and spirit with spirit can meet,
> Closer is he than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet,

and yet in two hundred thousand lines Tennyson addresses him only a half dozen times at the most. But Tagore speaks directly to God in almost all the poems of his maturity. He even takes liberties with God. Thus he says:

> This autumn morning is tired with excess of light, and if your songs grow fitful and languid give me your flute awhile.
>
> I shall but play with it as the whim takes me,— now take it on my lap, now touch it with my lips, now keep it by my side on the grass.
>
> But in the solemn evening stillness I shall gather flowers, to deck it with wreaths, I shall fill it with fragrance; I shall worship it with the lighted lamp.
>
> Then at night I shall come to you and give you back your flute.
>
> You will play on it the music of midnight when the lonely crescent moon wanders among the stars.[1]

[1] *Fruit-Gathering*, poem xxii.

This is real with the man. I have challenged him to show that it is not chiefly art for art's sake, and have left off abashed, convinced by the nature and manner of his replies that these experiences are the very tissue of his daily life. He has himself summed up his apologia in these words: "drunk with the joy of singing, I forget myself and call thee friend who art my lord." [1]

Few westerners are capable of that sort of thing. We hear something remotely like it in church, we hear something genuinely like it from the lips of an occasional man or woman or child, but we are too busy with thoughts and things and permanent possibilities of sensation to keep up a real acquaintance with an invisible person. If before taking the ether or hearing the physician's report we instinctively breathe a prayer, the thing is so infrequent that it must surprise the person addressed. And yet in fact man is not the secure animal he fancies himself, ingeniously refashioning the earth in broad daylight. He is a precarious thing, muddling in the dark among enemies. He needs a friend.

Tagore made a great hit with American women, partly because he is so unlike the average swami who appears with the latest revelation to enchant white-gloved audiences. And especially he scored with his *flair* for childish psychology, and his exquisite love of

[1] *Gitanjali*, poem 2.

children. The man who stood up in Orchestra Hall and poured out vials of white wrath is the man who manages quite simply to link the baby with the whole majestic organism of nature.

Why are those tears in your eyes, my child?

How horrid of them to be always scolding you for nothing.

You have stained your fingers and face with ink while writing — is that why they call you dirty?

O, fie! Would they dare call the full moon dirty because it has smudged its face with ink?

For every little trifle they blame you, my child. They are ready to find fault for nothing.

You tore your clothes while playing — is that why they call you untidy?

O, fie! What would they call an autumn morning that smiles through its ragged clouds?

Take no heed of what they say to you, my child.

They make a long list of your misdeeds.

Everybody knows how you love sweet things — is that why they call you greedy?

O, fie! What would they call us who love you.[1]

Being primarily an artist, an artist with a very perfect sense of the value of words, Tagore did not lecture us on his first trip. He came to see his son, whom he educated in scientific agriculture at the University of Illinois. Yet in one lecture, given at the University of Chicago and repeated at Harvard, he could not refrain from saying: "The modern

[1] *The Crescent Moon*, p. 20.

civilisation of the west, by all its organised efforts, is trying to turn out men perfect in physical, intellectual, and moral efficiency . . . They are ever disciplining themselves to fight nature and other races; their armaments are getting more and more stupendous every day; their machines, their appliances, their organisations go on multiplying at an amazing rate." [1] All this, he admitted, is a splendid achievement, but declared that it is not the realization of life.

He went home, and they gave him the Nobel prize. Like many others, I wrote congratulations. He replied: "The prize will be of very great help to my school, but the honour has proved to be a very great burden to myself, which I must accept humbly and without complaining, bearing in mind that it is the first greeting of sympathy and respect that has come to the east from the west in the modern time." Now Nobel, as you all recall, was the inventor of dynamite, and believed that dynamite would render war so dangerous that men would shrink from it. He was mistaken, and it is slowly becoming clear that no technical equipment of any human instinct will change the instinct.

Tagore devoted himself in the following year to his school, which often takes the refractory pupils from other schools and without military discipline absorbs them, changes

[1] *Sadhana,* p. 13.

them into loyal citizens of a beloved community. Just before the war broke out he was in the hills, resting, and wishing—as his father before him had wished—that he need never descend to the plain again. If his father had remained there in 1858 and thenceforth, there would have been no poet born in 1861. But presently Sir Rabindranath was seized with a sense that his work was not done. He must back to the plain, and do what he could to persuade young India to keep the right line of development — social coöperation, and not mere political freedom, or economic exploitation, conflict, and rivalry. The call seemed to come to him as from a clear sky, with a force which refused to be ignored. In great reluctance he sat down and wrote:

The trumpet lies in the dust.

The wind is weary, the light is dead . . .

I was on my way to the temple with my evening offerings, seeking for a place of rest . . . when I found thy trumpet lying in the dust.

Was it not the hour for me to light my evening lamp? . . .

I was certain my wanderings were over and my debts all paid, when suddenly I came upon thy trumpet lying in the dust.

Strike my drowsy heart with thy spell of youth! . . .

Sleep is no more for me — my walk shall be through showers of arrows . . .

For tonight thy trumpet shall be sounded! [1]

[1] Abridged from *Fruit-Gathering,* poem xxxv.

This poem appeared in the *Times* soon after the war broke out, and was taken to be his approval of England's course. But when he wrote it he had no immediate apprehension of war.

When now it proved to be a long war he feared that America might be drawn into it, as Japan had been, and that later Japan and America might find within themselves the materials and occasion of another. He had no hope that any word of his might check anything; he believed that nationalism would become more and more impassioned and passionate. Yet he went to Japan and thence to America, deivering a lecture called the "Cult of Nationalism," a lecture which will appear in the March *Atlantic*. The fire shut up in his bones flamed out. The nation, he said, which should be the embodiment of a people's humanest ideals, the organization of its finest contributions to the world, has become the organized selfishness of a people. It is impersonal. It is a machine. It does not represent the goodness of the humane individuals who compose the essential nation. It has no humane power to discriminate. It is a machine of power, bent only on emulation of other like machines in worldliness. And now these mechanisms are going mad. We see the last act of the tragedy of what is unreal.

Had I the manuscript of this great lecture at hand, a large part of what I have said would

be quite superfluous. For never was there an arraignment of mechanical organization so competent, so eloquent, so impressive as this. But commenting on it an American newspaper said that no message stood a chance of getting across to us unless it was delivered in a bass voice. A bass voice! Did we listen to the bass voice of that terrible old man, half democrat and half despot, James J. Hill, when he warned us against excess of industrialism? No. Many a voice has bassed our trespass unregarded. And as for tenor voices, my recollection is that the voice in Horeb, on the interesting occasion when wind and earthquake and fire passed without revealing divine accents, was a very light tenor indeed. No, we are too busy to listen to any natural voice. We may have to listen to the bass voice elongated into that of great guns, and the tenor voice whining as shrapnel.

No one has more frankly acknowledged than Sir Rabindranath that West and East are complementary and necessary to each other. And his India, especially rich in humane agriculture and humane contemplation, may in due time become the real reconcilement of machinery and ideals. Machines in India may become genuine savers of labor, and genuine saviors of the spirit. A mechanical principle will pass through barriers of caste that nothing else will penetrate. Cars and cams may induce precisely that degree of imper-

sonal intercourse which unites a population of widely varied races into a peaceful and democratic whole. Therefore I am for Hindu students in America.

Meantime in the trenches and the dugouts the sons of gentlemen are not singing McAndrews' hymn to the steam engine, or anything to the effect that East and West shall never meet. What they ask for in the hospital is volumes that will remind them of green fields and running brooks, of Arden and of Eden. And some of them are reading *Gitanjali* and *The Gardener* and *Fruit-Gathering*.

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